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Book Review: The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary

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The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary. By Jennifer Sinor. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002. xiv + 238 pp. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

"Worked hard today of course," writes Annie Ray, January 17, 1881, testifying to another day. "Ordinary writing" suggests the functional and dull: shopping lists, inventories, thank yous, and diaries, which author Jennifer Sinor likens to things we "toss" once they've outlived their use. Sinor seeks to redefine and elevate these writings, insisting that "ordinary" is not "commonplace"; their value lies in their ordering of self within a life.

Sinor employs feminist, historical, rhetorical, and literary perspectives, and counterpoints analysis with memoir, letters to living and dead, and reflective demonstrations of her own writing process. Examining a surviving volume of her great-great-great aunt Annie Ray's diary, Sinor probes the potential of the discarded. Written in the pages of a ledger book, the diary is the sole artifact through which Annie can speak.

Annie Ray epitomizes obscurity; even Sinor's description of Annie's photograph signifies emptiness: "she seems, less the center and more the hole. . . ." Annie's life on the Plains of nineteenth-century South Dakota means repetitive work, frequent separation from her husband (an itinerant blacksmith), and social isolation.

Annie's diary appears as unbroken "inter-text" between chapters, which allows the reader to experience the accumulation of her days. Sinor observes that by current definitions, such work is not "storied" text, and thus non-literary. This anti-story, full of narrative omissions, requires a different reading, Sinor claims, one that seeks to illuminate "the limitations of story." Sinor's explorations focus on "the act of writing *in* the days rather than *of* the days." This, she asserts, is the foundation from which one must read "ordinary" work. As if seeking to describe a person from her shadow, Sinor maps the negative spaces of Annie Ray's diary.

Sinor contends that the nineteenth-century ideal for women to "maintain stability and avoid disruption" is reflected in diarists' exactitude. Annie Ray's coded language—stripped of pronoun, rife with verb, yet rendered with precise numbers, amounts, or times—was a means to create "a fiction of stability" and, on paper at least, to control a life both chaotic and confining. The motley content of entries lacks context. But for Annie, notations of weather conditions, tasks performed, financial records, comments on her husband's absence, the noting of menses, states of health, and occasions of sex are experienced "wholecloth," as if they are of equal value, even as they are pieced together daily. Sinor recommends that despite absent narrative, such "ordinary" works must be viewed as "lifewriting."

Although Sinor supports her position, her text seems needlessly overdeveloped, reiterative, and structurally convoluted. Insertions of memoir seem at times purposeless or dislocated. Sinor's clearest work comes when she is

closest to Annie Ray's text. The delight of this volume is found in Annie Ray's days, which without Sinor's passionate discoveries would remain outside our view.

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